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ABSTRACT

Teachers' responsibility to improve students' writing entails changes in the teacher, the students, and the school. First, commitment to improvement requires the attainment of new knowledge on the teachers' part. They must be familiar with current research on the writing process and with how to translate that research into classroom practice. Second, a commitment to improvement requires a change in the way teachers work with students. Teachers must attempt to enhance the students' language base in every possible way. They must do all in their power to guarantee that the students' experience in school is one in which the students have an opportunity to use language, raise questions, listen, read, and witness adults writing. Students must receive direct instruction in writing, and be required to read the same types of discourse that they are requested to write. Students must also gain from evaluation. Third, commitment to improvement requires that schools implement quality writing programs that are based on current theory and research in writing. These programs would provide subject matter in many forms for writing experiences, and would involve a curriculum wide emphasis on writing instruction. (HTH)

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WRITING INSTRUCTION: COMMITMENT TO IMPROVEMENT

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Keynote Speech for
Queensboro Reading Council
Conference
Bayside, New York
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Writing Instruction: Commitment to Improvement

As human beings we are placed at the top of the animal kingdom by our ability to use language - and that use in nearly all societies moved from oral communication to communication recorded in a written form. All of us in this room are involved with enhancing the development of this ability to communicate. We hope to improve that ability in our young. For years, we have focused our attention on improving the ability to read. We have arrived at a point, if I am to believe your program, where we are focusing much more attention on improving our students' ability to write.

I assume that many in this room have been given the responsibility of working with students in this area. What does such a responsibility entail and how will it change your actions in your commitment to improve your students' ability to write?

In my comments I will focus on three areas: self, student, and school, as I discuss writing instruction - commitment to improvement.

What does it mean to self?

I submit that involvement in writing instruction requires a change in oneself, and I believe this change will come in a number of ways. If we are to bear the responsibility for improving student performance, such commitment requires the attainment of new knowledge on our part. Much of what has been learned about writing - what the writer does and what must be done to enhance this performance - has been made public recently, more being learned about the subject in the last ten years than in the previous 100. We then must know this body of information and must in some way translate - transfer it into our classroom practice.

We must understand the writing process and all that it entails. It is necessary to move beyond a surface awareness of the buzz words of the process - it means that we are committed to the idea that writing is indeed a process which involves a number of stages and that the writer moves through these stages not in a linear fashion but in a recursive way. Once we as teachers are committed to this concept, our life will change.

We will recognize that each writer is an individual and can be at different stages of development. We will recognize that our approach to time will have to change - this does not mean a longer school day or year which has been suggested by a number of the reports assessing today's educational scene. We will have to reassess our tendency to assign a piece of writing on one day with the expectation of completion at the end of a period or at the end of the week. We may have to recognize that some pieces of writing can be put away for another time.

Such changes in self will come about quicker, I believe, if we ourselves become writers. By this I do not mean that we all strive for the Nobel prize or such recognition. I do not mean to suggest that our accomplishments have to be even greater than our students. What I do mean is that we experience the struggle of writing, the challenge of putting our ideas on paper, the need for organization, the effort necessary to bring a piece to completion. We will never adequately be able to work with students to help them improve as writers if we have not experienced the writing process.

Let me now turn my attention to the student. If there is a commitment to improvement - a change must come about regarding the student - the way we work with the student and in the student's performance.

We must attempt to enhance the student's language base in every possible way. We can no longer assume that the student comes to us with the experience of being read to, of having been an active participant in language use. We can no longer assume that the student has experienced conversations with a number of adults and enjoyed the modeling of language which we all know is necessary. We must then do all in our power to guarantee the student's experience in our school - in our classroom - in our lab - is one that is rich in language - one in which the student does have an opportunity to use language, to raise questions, to listen, to read, and one in which the student witnesses the adult writing - because if that student does not see you write - that student may never see an adult write.

We must be certain that our students have the opportunity to write - to write whole pieces - for different purposes for different audiences - a shift away from underlining, writing single word answers and filling in the blanks.

When possible the student must be shown that writing is a skill needed and called for in all subjects and that the skills used and developed in writing are the same as skills developed in other disciplines as well. The student must be taken through the process, experience the demands and necessities of prewriting, experience the struggle and exhilaration of drafting, and experience the satisfaction of bringing a piece to the point of publication and sharing.

The student must receive direct instruction in writing. No longer can we hope to improve the student's performance through merely assigning writing - you can not expect a student to write a piece of description unless you teach the student how to describe. You can not expect a student to organize through cause and effect unless instruction has preceeded such a demand. You can not expect a student to analyze the writing task, develop an idea with supporting detail, present a logical argument, prepare a piece of persuasion unless there has been adequate instruction for such assignments.

As people involved in reading instruction, I suggest that we make certain that our students experience reading the same types of discourse that they are requested to write and more. If they are to write narrative, they must read narrative; if they are to write persuasion, then they must read persuasion; if they write description, they must read description. Just as research has shown us that children develop story grammars, there is growing evidence which suggests that other discourse grammars are developed as well.

The student must also gain from evaluation. Much has been said about evaluation and I must admit that I have played a small part in the writing assessment craze. But we must go beyond holistic rating if we are to develop students' writing ability. As teachers we must do more than wield the red marking pen. We must do more than mark up the papers with sp's, awk's and on students' papers. Rather we must be able to coach the young writer, to listen to what the writer says, to suggest, to raise questions; and we must be able to offer concrete instruction to overcome students' weaknesses as evidenced in their final written product.

Now I would like to comment on the school in this discussion of writing instruction - commitment to improvement.

I suggest that you review carefully the characteristics of a good writing program published recently by the Bureau of English and Reading Education of the New York State Education Department. I will comment on some of these characteristics. (The material below is taken directly from Helping Student Writers-Grades K-6, New York State Education Department, Albany, New York, 1983.)

An Effective Writing Program

An operational definition of writing and strong program ingredients must be the basis for any efforts to improve student writing within the school situation. Planners of writing programs and classroom teachers must begin with an adequate conception of what writing is. In the NCTE statement, writing is described as "...the process of selecting, combining, arranging and developing ideas in effective sentences, paragraphs, and, often, longer units of discourse. The process requires the writer to cope with a number of variables: method of development (narrating, explaining, describing, reporting, and persuading); tone (from the very personal to quite formal); form (from a limerick to a formal letter to a long research report); purpose (from discovering and expressing personal feelings and values to conducting the impersonal 'business' of

everyday life); possible audiences (oneself, classmates, a teacher, 'the world')." Improving one's writing ability involves developing increasing skill and sensitivity in selecting from and combining these variables to shape particular pieces of writing. It also involves learning to conform to the conventions of the printed language appropriate to the aim of the writer and to the form, purpose, and tone of the pieces of writing.

In developing school writing programs, planners and teachers must keep in mind the characteristics of an effective writing program. These characteristics are described in the following chart, which has been expanded from "Standards for Basic Skills Writing Programs," published by the National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, IL, March 1979.

Characteristics of an Effective Writing Program

Factors	Examples	How Identified
1. The writing program reflects an awareness of current theory and research in writing.	1. Writing activities reflect the awareness that writing is a process. Students must be given the opportunity to think and plan, to compose on paper, to revise, to proofread, to share. 2. Writing instruction is <i>not</i> equated with grammar and mechanics instruction. 3. Teachers value writing and are models for the students. 4. Students are given help during the writing process rather than after the work is completed.	1. Is time provided for instruction in and use of the prewriting, drafting, revising, and publishing stages of writing? 2. Is the writing instruction based on whole pieces of writing rather than grammar exercises, workbooks, and ditto sheets? 3. Do teachers write and share their writing with the students? 4. Do teachers respond at various stages of the writing process, rather than limit their responses to the finished product?

Factors	Examples	How Identified
2. Writing instruction is a substantial and clearly identified part of an integrated English language arts program.	1. Writing is done on a regular, planned basis, not just when it can be "squeezed in." 2. Writing is part of the language arts curriculum. 3. Writing is not limited to responses to literature.	1. Do lesson plans show that writing is scheduled on a regular basis? 2. Does the district have a K-12 language arts curriculum which provides for listening, speaking, reading, and writing to be taught at all grade levels? 3. Is writing used for a variety of purposes and audiences?
3. The subject matter of the writing activities is meaningful to the students.	Students are frequently given the opportunity to generate their own topics for composition.	Do writing activities give the students the opportunity to express their own feelings, experiences, ideas, knowledge, research, imagination, etc.? Are the writing activities ones that the students can recognize as having meaning and utility in their lives outside the classroom?
4. Students are taught to write in many forms.	1. Student writing includes summaries, notes, captions, poems, journal entries, reviews, descriptions. 2. Students write both long and short pieces.	1. Does instruction extend beyond the tasks on a writing test? 2. Are models of new types of writing made available to students and discussed?
5. Students are taught to write for a variety of audiences.	Activities give students the opportunity to write for themselves, for other students, for parents, for younger children.	Does the teacher see that writing is shared with appropriate audiences? Are students made aware of the differences between public and private writing?
6. Students are taught to write for a variety of purposes.	Activities give students the opportunity to write for purposes, such as to express personal feelings, to explain, to define, to clarify thinking, to consolidate information, to describe, to narrate.	Does instruction extend beyond the tasks on a writing test?

Factors	Examples	How Identified
7. Students are encouraged to compose during class time.	1. Students are given the time to talk about their planning, drafting, revising, and editing. 2. Teacher-student conferences are a regular feature of instruction. 3. Class time is devoted to all aspects of the writing process: prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. 4. Resources such as dictionaries, thesauruses, grammar texts, writing models are available to students.	1. Is there provision for regular small-group work and partnered activities? Do students write often and on a regular basis? 2. Do conferences take place during the writing process? Are teachers available to students when the students are writing? 3. Is there an awareness that students may be in different stages of the composing process at the same time? 4. Is there a "writing corner" in the classroom? Do teachers model the use of resources and encourage students to use them?
8. Students receive instruction in expressing ideas as well as instruction in developing control over conventions such as spelling, punctuation, capitalization, usage, sentence structure.	1. Instruction in conventions of written standard English is based on the students' own writing rather than on workbook exercises. 2. Conventions of written standard English are developed by going through the writing process.	1. Is the focus of instruction on communicating ideas rather than on mechanics? 2. Is emphasis on writing conventions reserved for the revising and editing phase rather than the drafting phase?
9. Students receive constructive responses to their own writing.	1. Classroom atmosphere encourages valuing of students' work. 2. No attempt is made to note every error. 3. Teachers respond at various stages of the writing and do not wait until it is finished. 4. Students participate in the evaluation process.	1. Do teachers respond positively to the efforts and accomplishments of the students? 2. Are comments focused on a limited number of areas? 3. Is the writing responded to by teachers and peers at various stages of the process? Are responses focused by key questions and worded constructively? 4. From several pieces of writing, does the student select pieces to have evaluated? Are peer conferences used from time to time as part of the evaluation of writing?

Factors	Examples	How Identified
10. Writing is called for in other subject areas across the curriculum.	Students write reports, directions, explanations, etc., using the content area subject matter.	Does the curriculum indicate any objectives, activities, etc. relative to writing in the content areas?
11. There is both formative (ongoing) and summative (concluding) evaluation.	1. Pretests and posttests using whole pieces of writing are used for evaluating progress. 2. Teacher-student conferences are a vital part of the evaluation procedure. 3. There is evidence of growth in papers written at different times.	1. Have pretests and posttests been analyzed and suitable instruction provided? 2. Do teachers use writing folders as a basis for conferences? 3. Are there evaluated writing samples or other documentation of progress in the student folders?
12. Suitable methods of program evaluation have been established.	1. Evaluation is based on examination of whole pieces of writing. 2. Consistent scoring methods are employed for both pretests and posttests, using a recognized procedure: e.g., holistic rating, primary trait scoring, Diederich scale, etc. 3. Affective measures evaluate student attitudes as well as progress.	1. Is each student required to have a writing folder which is reviewed periodically? 2. Is there evidence of student progress as a result of instruction? 3. Do the students have a positive attitude toward writing?

In my discussion of writing instruction--commitment to improvement, I have suggested some directions which we all must take--changes in self, changes in relationships with students, and changes in the school program. With effort on our parts in these areas particularly, I am certain that improvement will come and students will be better writers.